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SUBJECT: DERECOGNITION OF "DEEMED UNIVERSITIES" INADEQUATELY
ADDRESSES ILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

11. (SBU) Summary: India's Human Resources Development (HRD) Minister, Kapil Sibal, is embarking upon an effort to reform higher education in India. One of his major endeavors is a crack-down on "deemed universities," which is an attempt to end various corrupt practices in Indian higher education. The deemed university crackdown will punish poorly run "sham" institutions, but also restrains South India's robust private education sector, and strengthens the inadequately equipped state-run universities. This issue is particularly relevant in South India, where Tamil Nadu had the lion's share of the "blacklisted universities" with 16, and Karnataka had the second most with six. End Summary.

Debate over "Deemed Universities"

12. (U) The Human Resources Development Ministry in November 2009 created a special task force, chaired by P.N. Tandon of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, to investigate 126 "deemed universities" that had been approved under previous HRD ministries on the recommendation from the University Grants Committee (UGC). On January 18, 2010 the HRD filed an affidavit with the Supreme Court, on the recommendation of the Tandon task force, to eliminate the university status for 44 of these 126 universities, and place an additional 44 on a "watch list," giving them three years to improve or lose their status.

13. (U) Kapil Sibal's predecessor, Arjun Singh, approved 59 institutions for "deemed" status during his tenure as HRD Minister (2004-09), as many as in the previous 50 years. The term "deemed universities" refers to private higher education institutions that were once colleges, which were affiliated with and therefore substantially controlled by public universities, but were "deemed" to have their own independent university status. The "deemed" private universities were thus released from control by government bureaucracies and were free to pursue innovative curriculums, modern research, and control over enrollment and tuition fees. While some of these "deemed" institutions did not deserve to be given university status, many in South India flourished post-1990s as job-oriented educational programs free from the state-run universities' bureaucratic red tape and archaic mandatory curriculums.

14. (U) The Tandon task force based its recommendations for withdrawal of "deemed status" on a list of criteria that included: whether the university was a sham, or purely for commercial profit, it was run as a family fiefdom, it lacked academic rigor (no quality research), or it was beyond capacity (lack of infrastructure, too many students with too few faculty.) Whereas some of these institutions undoubtedly deserved to have their status withdrawn, several institutions with very good reputations were also thrown into the mix. For example, Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) and SRM University both located in Tamil Nadu, have consistently received high rankings and have a well-established reputation as top universities, but were placed "on watch" by the HRD. Furthermore, the Committee put some of these institutions on the "black list" because they were run by family members or politicians instead of qualified academics, an issue that could have easily been resolved with a little notice. Many of our contacts noted that the problem

with this reform is that while it is well intentioned, it was done in haste and many qualified institutions and forward-leaning programs will be cut because of this.

15. (SBU) We visited one university on the "blacklist," Saveetha University in Tamil Nadu, where senior officials told us that they had not received any official response from the Tandon task force or the HRD ministry, and complained that no one from the task force had even visited the campus. Saveetha officials told us that they were allowed only ten minutes in New Delhi to make their case to the task force, and heard only through the press that their university was on the "blacklist." Furthermore, they claim they have not been told the reasons for the poor performance review, and therefore are unable to fix any problems they may have. From what we saw, the university appeared to have superior infrastructure to the average state-run university and had ongoing construction. Classrooms appeared to have modern equipment. Saveetha officials also noted that they had received glowing reviews from the UGC as recently as September 2009. The "deemed university" debate has eased up slightly since the Supreme Court ordered a "hold" until March 8 to review the HRD's request, but tensions are expected to rise again after the Supreme Court makes its decision.

16. (SBU) We met with K. Ponmudy, Minister for Higher Education in Tamil Nadu, who said that he would like to eventually do away with all "deemed universities" and have all the bodies of education under one single source, with one regulator, the state government. In doing so, however, none of the issues brought up by the Tandon Committee would be addressed and there might be no real reform of higher education. These institutions would be returned to government control, and politicians such as Ponmudy would have increased power, including patronage and influence over hiring and

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firing of faculty.

Corruption in higher education

17. (SBU) We met with Professor M. Anandakrishnan, currently the Chairman of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and a member of the Tandon task force appointed to suggest reforms in higher education, particularly regarding the "deemed universities." Dr. Anandakrishnan explained that India's education system is second only to politics as the nation's most corrupt system. He told us of enormous "under the table" entrance fees (known as "capitation fees" in local parlance), including charges of between \$100,000 and \$200,000 USD just for a seat at a post-graduate medical college, paid up front and in cash. (Comment: Our locally employed staff corroborate this story and have personal contacts who have paid large sums as "capitation fees" for seats in medical schools. This fee is separate from the annual tuition. End comment.) Dr. Anandakrishnan also told us of an instance when an IAS officer served as a vice-chancellor despite lacking any qualifications to do so. He also cited one example of a doctoral program which had 110 faculty members (of which only 18 had PhDs) to support 1200 PhD students.

18. (SBU) Dr. Anandakrishnan told us that some of these institutions were set up by Congress or allied party (such as the DMK) politicians, and he cited the Rajiv Gandhi Institute in Sriperumbudur and the Bharat University, both in Tamil Nadu, as examples of poorly-run institutions headed by politicians. According to Dr. Anandakrishnan, the task force took its findings to Minister Kapil Sibal, who reported them to PM Singh; PM Singh then asked Sibal to "clean it up."

"Deemed university" reform needed, but done poorly

19. (SBU) Comment: The issue at stake with de-recognizing the "deemed universities" is that in throwing out some of these "bottom of the barrel" institutions, many very good institutions will also be placed at risk. Not only will thousands of students suffer because of an association with a "blacklisted" university, but future

progress in higher education in India is at stake. By forcing these private institutions to revert back to mandatory state-controlled curriculum, the forward-leaning programs that had been developed in South India as an alternative in order to offer students an opportunity to succeed in fast-growing sectors, such as information technology, will no longer be available. Programs that were developed to get around the outdated state-run curriculum to offer more modern programs in medical and engineering schools will be cut. Rather than dealing with the corruption and inadequacy endemic to the government-run universities, absorbing the "deemed universities" back into the public sector may only exacerbate the problem. End comment.

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